

# Women in Sports

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*By Cynthia A. Malecki*

"One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar." With those words by Helen Keller (1880–1968), the theme for this issue "Women in sports" was chosen.

Powerful images came to mind, such as a solitary woman running through the desert, or whacking a tennis ball over the net, or jumping a hurdle—images of women aggressively competing, pushing the edge, and sweating. Those images and the opportunities for women to not only participate in athletics but be recognized for their achievements can be summed up in a phrase from the seventies "You've come a long way, baby!"

The legendary "Babe" Didrickson Zaharias, who mastered many a sport and competed alongside men in golf, finally succumbed to wearing makeup and dresses so that society would deem her "feminine."

In the 1992 Olympic Games, Algerian middle-distance runner Hassiba Boulmerka received death threats—not support—from some people in her country. They objected to the Muslim woman running in the track and field competition dressed in shorts and a sleeveless top. She should cover herself, they said, and not run with naked legs in front of thousands of men. Hassiba replied she was an athlete and was appropriately dressed for the competitions.

It has been a long hard struggle for women. When the modern Olympic Games started in 1896, there were no women athletes. Four years later, at the Paris Olympics, Charlotte Cooper became the first woman to win a gold medal (in tennis). By the 1996 Olympics, the number of women athletes competing in those games had increased by 36 percent; unfortunately, today men still outnumber women by at least two to one in the Olympic Games.

In the United States opportunities for girls and women to participate in high school and college sports were few until the passage of the Title IX legislation in 1972. Title IX prohibited gender discrimination in federally funded schools and universities. However, progress was slowed by the entrenched practices of schools and colleges dominated by male athletic programs and the Supreme Court's 1984 Grove City decision, which weakened the law. Then, in 1988, athletes such as Flo Hyman (winner of a silver medal in volleyball in the 1984 Olympics) and Wilma Rudolph (1960 Olympic gold medal winner in track) lobbied with activists to pass the Civil Rights Restoration Act. That act ensured that girls and women would not be discriminated against in high school and college athletic programs. Today in the U.S. over one-third of all female students in high school play sports, and the number of women participating in university sports has tripled.

Women now compete in almost every sport, whether the competition is team, individual, or mixed gender. There are thousands of women athletes worldwide. The following vignettes of women athletes span different sports and time periods. Each worked hard to become the best athlete she could be.

## **"Babe" Didrickson Zaharias is considered one of the greatest athletes of all time.**

She won more medals (and set more records) in more sports than any other athlete in the 20th century. Babe first played basketball, then went on to track and field in the 1932 Olympics. Babe received a gold medal in the javelin throw (setting an Olympic record) and a gold medal in the 80-meter hurdles (with another Olympic record). She won a silver medal in the high jump.

After the Olympics, Babe decided to try golf and by 1947, she had won 17 consecutive tournaments. One of those was the British Women's Amateur golf tournament, and Babe was the first American woman to win it. In 1948, she helped form the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA). As a professional golfer, she won 31 tournaments in a span of eight years, including three U.S. Women's Open Tournaments. She continued to win at golf until her death in 1956.

Babe tackled other sports during her life and became accomplished in tennis, softball, and baseball; she was also an expert bowler, diver, and roller skater. She received her nickname by hitting five home runs in a single game, as did New York Yankee baseball player Babe Ruth.

## **Wilma Rudolph was an American sprinter.**

Wilma was born premature and the 20th of 22 children. Wilma's early childhood was fraught with diseases: measles, mumps, chicken pox, pneumonia, scarlet fever, and polio. It was polio that left her with a paralyzed leg, and doctors predicted she would never walk. When Wilma was six years old, she was fitted with a steel brace that would enable her to walk on her own. After a few years Wilma discovered she could remove the brace and walk for short periods. By the time Wilma was 12, she was walking, running, and even playing basketball. It was running that would be her greatest talent.

Wilma won three gold medals at the 1960 Olympics in Rome. It was the first time the games were televised and the first time an American woman had won three gold medals at a single Olympic Games. Although very nervous and nursing a sprained ankle, Wilma won the gold in the 100-meter and the 200-meter races. In the 4x100-meter team relay, Wilma was the anchor runner. When the baton was passed to Wilma, she fumbled the pass and that put her in third place. But her determination to win a gold medal made her run faster than ever before and she easily won the heat. Her lightning speed at the Olympics prompted Time magazine to call her "the fastest woman the world had ever seen."

After the Olympics Wilma became an elementary school teacher and a coach, gave lectures across the United States, and founded the Wilma Rudolph Foundation to help young athletes. She died at age 54 from a brain tumor.

## **Joan Benoit Samuelson is an Olympic marathon runner.**

Joan originally wanted to be a professional skier, but as a 15-year-old she broke her leg while skiing a slalom course, thus ending her dream. In high school she concentrated her efforts on

field hockey and track, but after realizing field hockey would offer limited opportunities she pursued a track career. In college she entered and won 10-kilometer races and eventually moved on to marathons. In 1979, she placed second in the Bermuda Marathon, which qualified her to run that year in the Boston Marathon. In 1983, Joan set a world record by winning the Boston Marathon in two hours, 22 minutes and 43 seconds.

In 1984, she entered and won the first women's Olympic marathon at the Los Angeles games. This was not only a significant accomplishment for Joan but also a significant victory for women. Until then, women could not compete in an Olympic marathon. In 1928, Olympic officials had decided it was "too strenuous" for women to run in races over 200 meters. In the 1960s, women were allowed to run in races over 200 meters; however the longest race was only 800 meters. In 1984, only after Katherine Switzer and other women marathoners lobbied the International Olympic Committee, the women's Olympic marathon was added to the competition.

Winning that first Olympic marathon in 1984 was a personal best for Joan. The year before the trials she had recovered from double Achilles tendon surgery. Just 17 days before the trials she required knee surgery, and five days after that operation she pulled a hamstring muscle. Because of her bad luck, Joan was not expected to enter the marathon, but she surprised everyone by winning the 1984 Olympic trials. During the race in Los Angeles, she skipped the first water station and pulled away from the other runners after just three miles. She maintained her lead and entered the Los Angeles Coliseum alone. Joan Benoit Samuelson is now retired from racing.

### **Jackie Joyner-Kersey is an American heptathlete.**

She is considered by many to be the world's greatest all-around female athlete since Babe Didrickson Zaharias. She has all the qualities that make a great athlete: dedication, discipline, and a sense of fair play.

Joyner-Kersey's specialty, the heptathlon, is a two-day competition in which women compete in seven track and field events. The first day consists of the 100-meter hurdles, shotput, high jump, and 200-meter run. The second day features the long jump, javelin throw, and 800-meter run. Joyner-Kersey won three Olympic gold medals, one silver medal, and two bronze medals in track and field events. When she won the heptathlon in the 1998 Olympic Games in Seoul, she not only broke her personal record but set a new world record.

Jackie Joyner-Kersey comes from a family of world class athletes. Her coach is her husband, Bob Kersey. Her brother, Al Joyner, won a gold medal in the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. Al married Florence Griffith (FloJo), herself an Olympic gold medal winner. (FloJo died from a heart seizure in 1998. She was 38.)

Jackie still holds the world record for the heptathlon. Jackie always gave back to her community and formed the JJK Community Foundation. She retired from competition in 1998. Jackie came out of retirement to qualify for the long jump competition in the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games.